

Nova Scotia communities raise fish farm alarm



By DAVID JACKSON - Provincial Reporter

They brought signs and stuffed paper salmon hanging from a coat rack.

There was an excerpt from a documentary called Salmon Wars, photos of sea lice-infested salmon, and a string of speakers.

In all, close to 300 people from across Nova Scotia gathered at the Lord Nelson Hotel in Halifax on Monday to raise the alarm about the form of aquaculture where the fish are in pens made of nets, found in the waters off coastal communities.

A group called the Atlantic Coalition for Aquaculture Reform, which lists more than 100 members, called for a moratorium on open-net pen aquaculture until a proper scientific and economic analysis of the practice is done.

Lewis Hinks, the Nova Scotia regional director with the Atlantic Salmon Federation, said the three big concerns with open-net pen operations are the potential for the salmon to escape, sea lice and disease.

He said those factors all increase the risk to wild salmon stocks, and he talked about the decline of their population in some areas where fish farms exist.

“What’s the solution? Closed containment,” he said. “I’m a firm believer that closed containment is the only way.”

Hinks said such systems on land or floating on the ocean meet the requirement of being “bio-secure — a barrier between caged fish and the wild fish.”

The coalition criticized the Dexter government’s [aquaculture strategy](#), released last week, and gave it an F grade. It said there should have been more public consultation on the document.

Raymond Plourde, wilderness co-ordinator for the Ecology Action Centre, a coalition member, accused the government of brushing off the public’s concerns and welcoming more open-net pen farms.

“Mr. Premier Darrell Dexter, we have a message for you today — you do not have permission to do this. You did not ask Nova Scotians,” Plourde said.

Fisheries and Aquaculture Minister Sterling Belliveau said Monday that he’s spoken to the Ecology Action Centre, fishermen’s groups and other associations about aquaculture.

Belliveau said the province is committed to protecting wild species.

“We’re listening to the stakeholders across Nova Scotia,” Belliveau. “I am totally convinced that we are on the right path and there’s been a lot of engagement on this topic.”

Belliveau rejected the idea of a moratorium. While the coalition says it has scientific evidence about problems associated with open-net pen aquaculture, the minister said there’s scientific evidence saying it can be done safely.

Belliveau also noted the industry can be a job creator in rural Nova Scotia.

Murray Hill, Nova Scotia regional manager with the Atlantic Canada Fish Farmers Association, said the coalition’s concerns are familiar to the industry. He said those involved feel it’s sustainable and there’s science to support that.

“Before any site goes in, there’s a very rigorous process that includes scientific evaluation. There’s a host of other factors, as well,” he said.

“All sites undergo a very rigorous risk assessment process under the federal component of the licensing system and that involves public consultation.”

An excerpt of journalist and author Silver Donald Cameron’s Salmon Wars documentary was played at the news conference. He said it will be screened in various communities later this month.

Stewart Lamont, managing director of Tangier Lobster, said the open-net pen issue is one where lobster fishermen and dealers — often at odds over price — find common ground.

“I want to thank the government of Nova Scotia, the government of Canada, and the salmon farming applicants. You have brought us together,” he said to applause from the crowd.

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